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Introduction to Ritual Theory Ritual Practice

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Introduction

In the last twenty years a number of diverse fields have found ritual to be an important focus for new forms of cultural analysis. Besides anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of religion, there are sociobiologists, philosophers, and intellectual historians who have turned to ritual as a “window” on the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds. The result has been a relatively broad and interdisciplinary conversation known as “ritual studies.” Certainly the notion of ritual has been central to research in religion and society since the late nineteenth century, and few other single terms have been more fundamental in defining the issues basic to culture, society, and religion. Now, however, ritual has become a topic of interest in its own right, not merely a tool for understanding more embracing social phenomena. Indeed, ritual has simultaneously become an object, a method, and even something of a style of scholarship on the American academic scene.

Given both the history and scope of the appeal to ritual as a category of experience and analysis, the term is overdue for an extended critical rethinking. Jack Goody first addressed the state of ritual theory in a definitive study published nearly thirty years ago. Yet when he last addressed it in 1976, he expressed a dramatic loss of confidence in the formal category of ritual.⁹ Aside from his comments, there has been no sustained analysis of the term that evaluates its role in our thinking on religion, society, and culture.¹⁰ Nor has there been any concomitant assessment of the underlying problems engaged by the term ‘ritual’ and the structure this category imposes on theoretical discourse.

This book undertakes such an analysis in two ways: first, through a critical reading of how the notion of ritual has been used in the study of religion, society, and culture; and second, through an attempt to carve out an approach to ritual activities that is less encumbered by assumptions about thinking and acting and more disclosing of the strategies by which ritualized activities do what they do. I do not provide a comprehensive history of the term, a review of the most famous ethnographic examples, or a revised theory of ritual—useful though these projects might be. The purpose of this book is both more ambitious and more pragmatic—to reassess what we have been doing with the category of ritual, why we have ended up where we are, and how we might formulate an analytic direction better able to grasp how such activities compare to other forms of social action.

The sections that follow concentrate on a broad but selective set of influential theories about ritual. My discussion remains focused on an explicitly theoretical level of reflection about ritual rather than one more linked to ethnographic data. While many theories come embedded in particular ethnographic studies, none confine themselves to interpreting just the rites of a particular group. They all generalize in order to discuss ritual action *per se*. Since I am concerned with the most basic assumptions and tendencies in thinking about ritual activities, the analyses that follow also remain rather abstract. My starting point is not some objective instance of ritual activity that I attempt to interpret, such as Vedic ritual or the garden magic of the Trobriand Islanders. Rather, my starting point is an exploration of what makes us identify some acts as ritual, what such a category does for the production and organization of knowledge about other cultures, and how we might assess the assumptions that create and constrain the notion of ritual. Truly thick ethnographic descriptions of particular rites rarely succumb to the systematic division of human experience evidenced in theoretical studies. When they do, it is frequently due to the influence of categories developed to empower theoretical discourse. The divergence between theoretical formulations and descriptive studies is germane to the issues raised here, but a fuller treatment is regrettably beyond the scope of this book.¹¹

In addition to analyzing the category of ritual and proposing another framework within which to assess ritual activity, this book

has a third level of concern. In arguing how categories of ritual practice have been used to define objects and methods of theoretical practice, I raise questions about the dynamics of theoretical practice as such. By dismantling ritual as a theoretical construct, it is possible to uncover some of the more hidden but decisive practices by which a body of theoretical knowledge is generated and theoretical activity is differentiated from other forms of social activity. As part of its exploration of ritual, therefore, this book initiates a foray beyond the customary confines of ritual theory to suggest some of the strategies basic to other forms of practice and the social relationships these practices support.

The intellectual framework for 'doing theory' has shifted dramatically in the last twenty years. The premises and boundaries of the theoretical enterprise have undergone a wave of challenges, a periodic but no less traumatic experience, leaving us to wonder how and what we can know. This series of challenges has generated an open debate on the social and political ramifications of particular forms of knowing.¹² Some consensus has emerged from this debate that critical analysis of a theoretical perspective must look not only to the logic of the set of ideas under scrutiny, but also to the history of their construction.¹³ In addition, a critical analysis must also incorporate a reflexive awareness of the conditions under which it operates to constitute meaningful interpretation.¹⁴ In this era of theoretical practice, therefore, we are "rethinking" entire conceptual constructions handed down within our fields of inquiry.¹⁵ Any thorough process of rethinking these basic concepts appears to involve three closely related operations: first, a deconstruction of the historical definitions of the problem or issue and a delineation of the circumstances under which the problem has been *a problem for us*; second, the proposal of an interpretive perspective on the issue that enables our cultural categories seriously to engage and be engaged by the material addressed; and third, an extension of this perspective to real applications and examples in order to explore relationships among hitherto unrelated issues.¹⁶

In rethinking ritual these operations form three stages of the argument that spans the following sections. The first stage discloses the construction of ritual as an object of analysis and thereby reveals the problems for us that have been embodied in the term and discourse on it. The second stage formulates an interpretation of this

problem that reflexively provides an analysis of its own conditions as an interpretation. And the third stage, by applying this interpretation to a field of interrelated issues, attempts to generate an open but coherent framework for seeing new relationships among traditional issues, without losing sight of the contingent and determined nature of this framework.

More specifically, the chapters in Part I take up the initial task of a critical theory of ritual by addressing the construction of the category itself and the role this construction has played in organizing a broad discourse on religion, society, and culture. Despite the differences among historians of religion, sociologists, and anthropologists, their theories of ritual all similarly function to resolve the complex problems posed by an initial bifurcation of thought and action. Indeed, theoretical discourse about ritual is organized as a coherent whole by virtue of a logic based on the opposition of thought and action. This argument suggests that, historically, the whole issue of ritual arose as a discrete phenomenon to the eyes of social observers in that period in which 'reason' and the scientific pursuit of knowledge were defining a particular hegemony in Western intellectual life.

Given such a sociohistorical and logical-practical context for the term "ritual" as a category of experience and of analysis, a question arises: Can there be any argument for continuing to ascribe validity to the term? Goody, as noted earlier, sees no further usefulness in a "global construct" like ritual and has seriously called for its retirement in favor of a revitalizing "paradigm shift."¹⁷ Although it is interesting to imagine a paradigm shift, any number of problems beset the attempt to jettison an older category, whether it be to impose a new one or simply to clear the field. There is hardly a consensus, first of all, about the inadequacy of the term ritual. It is still being used widely both by the general public and by many academic disciplines less immediately concerned with the problems that attend it. In fact, the popularity of the term and the topic, evidenced in ritual studies, reflects the very success scholars have had in securing the retirement of older and more obviously problematic terms. That is, ritual has replaced terms such as 'liturgy' versus 'magic', which were used to distinguish high religion from primitive superstition or *our* ritual from *theirs*. To try to discard the term ritual just when scholars have been successful in popular-

izing its use would imply a desire for esoteric categories accessible only to the cognoscenti.

Such housecleaning could also undermine any thorough exploration of how and why the term has become problematic. It is far from clear that a quickly summoned paradigm shift could solve either our immediate problems or the more buried ones they rest upon. Many attempts to produce a paradigm shift end up simply repackaging older problems in new jargon. Rather than eventually find that the disgraced presuppositions of the abandoned term have resurfaced in a newly deployed set of categories, it seems more responsible to hold on to our battered terminology, just as we hold on to the artifacts of our own personal histories no matter how difficult they might become. They ensure that we do not forget where we come from. They curb our pretenses. We may decide to tailor our terms with annotations or hyphenations, but it would be ill-advised to pretend to abandon what has been so well internalized. A real revolution will not be accomplished by a mere change of terms, nor will it be held off by modifying older ones. I *do* intend to modify the term ritual to function as something other than a “global construct” or “a key to culture.”¹⁸ Yet my close reliance upon current and preceding scholarship ensures continuity with the commonsense notion of ritual while making explicit some of the assumptions and perspectives built into it. Given the analysis of discourse on ritual presented in Part I, it becomes apparent that rethinking ritual will yield less rather than more—less generality, less universality, and perhaps less of the trappings of persuasive, explanative power. This ‘less-ness’ may ultimately be more effective in spurring a shift of paradigms than the introduction of newly designed terms.

Part II, which takes on the second task of critical theorizing, proposes that so-called ritual activities be removed from their isolated position as special paradigmatic acts and restored to the context of social activity in general. Some attempts to see ritual as social praxis are analyzed, as are the stubborn difficulties encountered by ‘practice theory’ in its attempt to transcend only the most obvious forms of the thought–action dichotomy. In response, I propose a focus on ‘ritualization’ as a strategic *way* of acting and then turn to explore how and why this way of acting differentiates itself from other practices. When analyzed as ritualization, acting

ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures. The confusions that accompany attempts to distinguish clearly between rite and non-rite—those perennial obstacles to neat definitions and classification—are revealed to be highly significant for understanding what ritualization does.

Part III addresses the large body of theories that discuss ritual as a form of social control. In so doing it attempts to fulfill the third task of a critical theory by applying an interpretation of ritualization as a culturally strategic way of acting to several classic issues within the traditional study of ritual, namely, belief, ideology, legitimation, and power. The main argument suggests that ritualization is a strategy for the construction of a limited and limiting power relationship. This is not a relationship in which one social group has absolute control over another, but one that simultaneously involves both consent and resistance, misunderstanding and appropriation. In exploring how ritualized ways of acting negotiate authority, self, and society, I attempt to delineate something of the social dynamics by which all activity reproduces and manipulates its own contextual ground.

As a particular reading of much of what has been written on ritual, this book is neither an objective nor a systematic review designed to evaluate each contribution in its own context and on its own merits. On the contrary, I have read to discover the cracks, instabilities, and manipulated themes in order to undo the process by which the notion of ritual has been constructed and to illuminate dynamics basic to how we think about the actions of others. At the risk of making the reading more difficult than it needs to be, I have tried to quote or paraphrase terms and descriptions as much as possible, since much of my argument rests on the subtle ways in which language is used.

Fredric Jameson introduced a recent study by calling attention to its “organizational fiction,” the textual ploy that implies the existence of a problem the study will resolve.¹⁹ The problem of ritual is, of course, just such an organizational fiction. This book is organized around a problem it first constructs and then solves—the problem of how the notion of ritual orders a body of theoretical discourse. I must first convince you that there is a problem and that

the nature of it is such that you will find the proposed solution suitable. This is a strategy of scholarly production, aspects of which are common to other forms of socially effective action. It is my hope that this book, by virtue of its arguments about ritual theory *as well as* its own performance as a piece of theoretical practice (with all its schemes, feints, and blind spots), will contribute to a discussion of the activities of understanding.

Notes

Epigraphs

1. Roy A. Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (Richmond, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1979), p. 174. Emphasis in the original.
2. Frits Staal, "The Meaninglessness of Ritual," *Numen* 26, no. 1 (1975): 9.
3. Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice," in *Violent Origins*, ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 198.
4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 30.
5. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 112.
6. Edmund R. Leach, "Ritual," in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 13, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 526.
7. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1960), p. 28.

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8. On ritual as work, see Victor Turner, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), pp. 39-41. Rappaport also talks of rituals as "public work" and "spirit work" (p. 177).

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9. Jack Goody, "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem," *British Journal of Sociology* 12 (1961): 142-64; and "Against 'Ritual': Loosely Structured Thoughts on a Loosely Defined Topic," in Moore and Myerhoff, pp. 25-35.
10. A number of writers provide useful overviews of ritual. Among these the best are Gilbert Lewis, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myth and Rituals* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1986); and Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
11. Others have explored this issue, even contending that anthropology and ethnology constitute two distinct disciplines. See Dan Sperber's essay entitled "Interpretive Ethnology and Theoretical Anthropology," in *On Anthropological Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 9-34. For another perspective on the gap between theory and ethnography, or research and writing, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. ix, 21, and Chapter 3. In their critique of anthropological writing, George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer (*Anthropology as Cultural Critique* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986]) find the gap between fieldwork and writing to be the object of much reflection (pp. 5, 12-13, 16). In his analysis of theory in the hard sciences, Wolfgang Stegmüller (*The Structure and Dynamic of Theories* [New York: Springer-Verlag, 1976]) also distinguishes two distinct "languages," one theoretical and the other observational (p. 3).
12. See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), originally published in 1979; James A. Boon, *Other Tribes, Other Scribes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Marcus and Fischer; and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).
13. Well-known examples include Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*,

trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1970), and *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972); Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and Fabian.

14. For a discussion of critical theorizing, see Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
15. To mention some of the more obvious titles in this vein, see Edmund Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1961); Dell Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Random House, 1969); Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Miriam Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); and E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
16. The stage of application does not necessarily imply a holistic structure of understanding of the type that has been criticized as a matter of "totalizing" explanations reaching for "absolutism." See Fredric Jameson's discussion of totalization in theory and "master narratives" in *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 27, 50ff; and in his introduction to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. ix-xi. These three features of a critical theory are based in part on Geuss, pp. 1-3, and Stegmüller, pp. 14-16.
17. Goody, "Against 'Ritual,'" pp. 27, 29, 34-35.
18. Goody, "Against 'Ritual,'" p. 32.
19. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 9.